

Building a sense of family at Visa Europe

Leadership development stimulates “ripples in the pond”

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Visa is one of the world’s best-known brands, and is a global market leader with more than 315 million Visa cards issued in Europe.

Five years ago, the business launched a leadership-development program (LDP) for high-potential people, starting with a simple business-mentoring program in the first year. Mentoring by senior executives remains a core element of the program, which has evolved over that time to include:

- a business-school program at IMD;
- short-term secondments;
- structured networking with current participants and alumni;
- participation in a project of strategic importance to the business;
- independent development coaching with Stellar Consulting; and
- roles as development champions, piloting new training programs.

The approach and benefits of the LDP were described in an article a year ago in *Development and Learning in Organizations* (2005).

This article describes the challenges faced by the LDP in its fifth year and the approaches Visa Europe has taken to keep the program fresh, and to accelerate the development of a coaching culture in the business – one of the original objectives for the program.

Work smarter to make Visa go faster

The pace and scope of change in the business continues to increase. Managers must work smarter to make Visa go faster, and the business needs to ensure – more than ever – that it has the right people with the right capability leading and managing the business.

As well as tough competitive challenges, Visa Europe has recently chosen to retain its membership structure, while around the world all other Visa regions are merging into a single entity before a public flotation. Visa Europe faces the challenge of continuing to increase its commerciality and competitiveness by leveraging the association model.

Greater business need has been met with powerful sponsorship. Visa Europe has a new leader in Peter Ayliffe, who was appointed President and CEO in March 2006. Previously, Peter had been on the board of Visa for six years and before that was a main board director, with responsibility for retail banking at Lloyds TSB. The LDP always benefited from the keen sponsorship of Hans van der Velde – now the deputy chairman of the Visa Europe board.

Peter Ayliffe is currently on the board of Investors in People, and continues that tradition of sponsorship from the very top of the organization.

Too successful? Today's challenges for the LDP

Visa Europe's LDP has everything going for it: it is now very well established and highly regarded; people aspire to be on the program; and it has more than just excellent sponsorship – it has full participation from Peter Ayliffe and members of his executive management committee, who act as mentors to the program's participants.

Now, more than in previous years, the program is faced with some unusual challenges. Has the program become so well established that perhaps it is having less of an impact as an aspirational and motivational program in the organization than it had at first? How can Visa keep the program fresh and motivating so that it inspires people to go the extra mile? How can the business maintain the prestige of a well-established program which is almost "part of the furniture" so that the highest-caliber participants continue to be selected?

A recent company-wide review of the LDP has thrown the spotlight on leadership in Visa Europe and highlighted a powerful appetite for leadership development to help the business to meet its challenges successfully.

How the LDP is evolving to meet the challenges

Short-term secondments are a relatively new addition to the LDP. The aim is to get participants out into a part of the business that is quite different from their own, and contributes to their development and understanding of the business. Where the secondments have worked well, they have delivered real benefits.

Jonathan Capon had worked in relationship management for three years when he was nominated for the LDP. His secondment was to strategy and planning – an area of the business that he knew very little about. His responsibility during his secondment was to work on Visa's medium-term plan. "This was a huge shift in my skill set and took me completely out of my comfort zone," he said. "I had the chance to see how Visa operates at senior levels. It was extremely challenging and demanding time. I learned a tremendous amount about Visa's vision, goals and strategy, and had the opportunity to work with some of the most senior people in the business."

But getting the secondments to work consistently well for everyone has been a real challenge. Success depends on all the right elements being in place. There are always business challenges in releasing high-potential people from their roles to take up secondments. Visa is looking more closely at direct "swaps" and at using back-filling as a development opportunity so that managers are confident that they will not be left with a big gap in their team when they release their person. It has also sometimes been a challenge to get genuine, high-value pieces of work for the LPPs to undertake during their secondment.

Sara Bruck, head of organization development and responsible for the LDP, said: "We all know – and we all agree – that a good secondment can be a powerful development opportunity for someone. We will continue to find ways to support and enable the business to release their people and to create really valuable secondment opportunities."

From suppliers to partners

Over the life of the program, Visa Europe's relationship with its suppliers has evolved to become increasingly collaborative, while never losing focus on the business needs. Visa Europe retains two main suppliers for the leadership program: IMD for the business-school program and Stellar for one-to-one development coaching.

IMD – precisely tailored

Over the life of the LDP, Visa has worked increasingly closely with IMD to ensure that the business-school element of the program is relevant to the business. This year, two participants from the LDP met IMD to co-design and tailor the week's program to meet precisely the requirements of the Visa participants and their project teams. IMD then



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selected speakers and tutors to focus on the relevant issues, challenges and skills the teams required to deliver their projects successfully. This approach delivered targeted development and support to the LDP participants, which accelerated their delivery of their strategic business projects.

From coachee to coach

From the start, a goal of the LDP was to support the development of a coaching culture in Visa Europe. Alumni from the program are selected and invited to be trained as coaches to Visa's emerging potentials (EPs). Visa designed guidelines and principles about the way internal coaching works in the business, and the company put in place a practical coaching skills program. Ongoing support is available to the internal coaches from an expert coach.

The program has just run its first year and is having a positive motivational impact. Annemarie Echevarria, a service manager in customer services, is one of Visa's EP people. She describes the benefits she experienced: “The coaching gave me the opportunity to see things from a different business perspective and encouraged me to try new ways of dealing with work challenges. It has helped me to become more self aware and to reflect on my actions and the impact that these have on those around me.”

Through the EP coaching program, Visa is beginning to reach further and deeper into the organization to identify and develop people with potential. A huge additional benefit is that the internal coaches have found their coaching skills extremely valuable in the management of their own teams and in their roles as leaders and coaches on major corporate-change programs.

Diane Scott, vice-president in corporate communications, took up the opportunity to train and work as an internal coach. “I have enjoyed coaching motivated people starting out on their careers,” she said. “I've learned about the areas of the business I knew very little about and extended my network of contacts. I have also used the coaching techniques I learned in my everyday work – I think that I now get more active buy-in and people take more responsibility – and this frees up my time.”

What's in it for Visa?

The LDP represents a significant investment for Visa Europe, both financially and in terms of senior-management time. What benefits are there for the business? The return on investment includes:

- Building the coaching skills of a key group of LDP alumni has helped to accelerate the growth of a coaching culture. Coaching is increasingly recognized as a key development tool – for line managers as well as coaches – and a key skill that is applicable across the business. As Diane Scott put it: “The benefits to the company come from the trained coaches using their skills in their everyday working relationships. It starts to foster a coaching culture from a grass-roots basis.”
- The ripple effect across the business – the program links people in a web of internal networks. The informal connections across the business are not just “nice to have”. Work and projects get delivered more quickly and easily. Organization boundaries are broken down and a sense of “family” is created.
- Visa develops people with broader management skills and the program helps to break down organization silos because people appreciate the challenges faced by other functional areas.



- Individuals are stretched, challenged, and moved out of their comfort zone and into their development zone. The LDP provides an opportunity to test and assess their potential.
- The program helps to identify and develop the best people and helps Visa to retain them. In the LDP participants, alumni of the program, and the emerging potential group, the business has a talent pool and is developing a potential leadership pipeline.
- The project element of the LDP has helped to ensure the successful delivery of some key business projects.

Where next?

In response to the challenges in its environment, the business is reaching strongly for leadership development at all levels in the organization. As Sara Bruck said: “We are looking much more closely at exactly what we mean by ‘leadership’, what we need to meet our challenges, and at what that means for development at different levels in the business.”

Visa recognizes that breadth of experience – as well as specialist expertise – is a strong foundation for developing people into senior roles. Secondments will continue and the business will increasingly be looking at inter-regional transfers.

The company is also strengthening its people-planning process – the way it manages succession and talent management. The aim is to balance skills across the organization and help to ensure that career moves are right for the individual as well as for the business, making the best use of talents and preparing people for more senior roles.

After five years, Visa Europe has the advantage of a substantial alumni group who have a positive impact on the fabric of the organization. Some will continue to develop as coaches and others will become more closely involved in key corporate projects and initiatives. Visa will be looking at the next phase of their development, and considering them as a key part of the talent pool for the future of the business.

Peter Ayliffe summarised Visa’s position: “To achieve our stretching objectives we need to continue to invest in our people. They have made us the leading worldwide payments brand and they will enable us to differentiate ourselves further and build on that leadership position.

“The LDP is a great program and one we wish to invest in to build on its success to date.”

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Note

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Reference

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